

Literalism and the Attributes of Allah

Nuh Ha Mim Keller

I received a letter in Jordan not too long ago from a British Muslim, asking me questions about modern calls to replace traditional Islam with an ostensible "return to the way of the Salaf, or 'early Muslims.'" When I answered one of these questions, I realized that many other people might be wondering the same thing, and thought that presenting the question to you tonight in a wider forum might be of greater benefit to the British Muslim and non-Muslim audience.

The letter asked me:

Are the Hanbali Mujtahid Imams al-Dhahiri and Ibn Hazm considered Ahl al-Sunna? And was Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal an anthropomorphist—meaning someone who ascribed human attributes to Allah? Can you provide me examples of the sayings of Imam Ahmad that show he did not have anthropomorphic 'Aqida?

The questions proved to be related in ways unsuspected by their author. What unites them is literalism as an interpretive principle, which is the subject of my talk tonight. We will look at it first in respect to *ijtihad*, meaning the 'qualified deduction of Islamic legal rulings from the Qur'an and hadith.' But we will look at literalism also, and most carefully, from the point of view of 'aqida or Islamic belief, in understanding the Qur'anic verses and prophetic hadiths that are called *mutashabihat* or 'unclear in meaning'—such as the verse in Surat al-Fath that says,

"Allah's hand is above their hands" (Qur'an 48:10)

—termed 'unclear in meaning,' *mutashabih*, because linguistically hand can bear multiple interpretations, and its ostensive sense seems to imply 'belief in a God with human attributes,' that is, anthropomorphism, an understanding categorically rejected by the Qur'anic verse in Surat al-Shura,

"There is nothing whatsoever like unto Him" (Qur'an 42:11).

We shall see that literalism was a school of thought in Islamic jurisprudence, though not considered a very strong one by traditional scholars. But in tenets of faith, and particularly in interpreting the relation of the *mutashabihat* to the attributes of Allah, literalism has never been accepted as an Islamic school of thought, neither among the Salaf or 'early Muslims,' nor those who came later.

In answer to the first question, "Are the Hanbali Mujtahid Imams al-Dhahiri and Ibn Hazm considered Ahl al-Sunna?" Dawud ibn 'Ali al-Dhahiri of Isfahan, who died 270 years after the Hijra, and Abu Muhammad ibn Hazm, who died 456 years after the Hijra, were not followers of Ahmad ibn Hanbal but Dhahiris or 'literalists' in jurisprudence. Whether Dawud al-Dhahiri was a mujtahid—meaning qualified to issue expert Islamic legal opinion—has been disagreed upon

by Muslim scholars, not only for reasons we will discuss, but also because little that he wrote has come down to us.

As for Ibn Hazm, traditional Islamic scholars have not accepted his claims to be a mujtahid, the first qualification of which is to have comprehensive knowledge of the Qur'an and hadith. Scholars point to his many substantive mistakes in hadith knowledge, and adduce, for example, that if someone doesn't even know, as Ibn Hazm did not, about the existence of the Sunan of al-Tirmidhi, who died nearly a hundred and fifty years before Ibn Hazm did, it is not clear how he can be considered a mujtahid. But aside from their qualifications, what interests us tonight is their Dhahirism or 'textual literalism' as an interpretive method.

What the Dhahiris are most famous for is their denial of all qiyas or analogy. It is recorded, for example, that Dawud held that the Qur'anic prohibition of saying "Uff" in disgust to one's parents did not prove that it was wrong to beat them, since the literal content of the verse only concerned saying "Uff," and no analogy could be drawn from this about anything else. Similarly, Ibn Hazm seems to have believed the prohibition in hadith of urinating into a pool of water did not show that there is anything wrong with defecating in it. These are two examples of denials of what is called in Arabic a qiyas jaliyy meaning an a fortiori analogy.

Denying the validity of the a fortiori analogy is so counterintuitive, that Imam al-Juwayni, who died 478 years after the Hijra, has said:

The position adopted by the most exacting of scholars is that those who deny analogy are not considered scholars of the Umma or conveyers of the Shari'a, because they oppose out of mere obstinacy and exchange calumnies about things established by an overwhelming preponderance of the evidence, conveyed by whole groups from whole groups back to their prophetic origin (tawatur).

For most of the Shari'a proceeds from ijtiḥad, and the unequivocal statements from the Qur'an and hadith do not deal [n: in specific particulars by name] with even a tenth of the Shari'a [n: as most of Islamic life is covered by general principles given by Allah to guide Muslims in every culture and time], so they [the literalists] are not considered of the learned" (al-Dhahabi, Siyar a'lam al-nubala' [Beirut: Mu'assasa al-Risala, 1401/1984], 13.105).

From Juwayni's remark that "the unequivocal statements from the Qur'an and hadith do not deal with even a tenth of the Shari'a," we can understand a main impetus of Dhahiri thought by which it differed from the four schools of Sunni jurisprudence; namely, that it radically truncated the range and relevance of the Shari'a to nothing more than those rulings established by the literal wording (dhahir) of hadiths or verses. And this is perhaps one reason today for renewed interest in the long-dead school, namely, that it frees people from having to learn and follow the large part of the Shari'a deduced from the general and comprehensive ethos of the Qur'an and sunna.

But secondly, if one reflects for a moment on the fiqh questions we hear urged today by youthful reformers in our mosques, it is plain that a great many of what are termed "Salafi ijtihads" are not salafi (early Muslim) at all, but mere Dhahiri or literalist interpretations of hadiths. To their credit, the movement we are

speaking of has revived interest in hadith among Islamic scholars across the board. But it has also given rise to a bid'a or 'reprehensible innovation'; namely, that the emphasis on hadith and its ancillary disciplines to the exclusion of other Islamic sciences equally necessary to understanding the revelation, such as fiqh methodology, or the conditioning of hadith by general principles expressed in the Qur'an, has created a false dichotomy in many Muslims' minds of either fiqh or hadith, where what is needed is fiqh or 'understanding' of hadith.

For example, a young man, after leading us at salat al-fajr prayer in Chicago a few months ago, told a latecomer to the first rak'a (who had been finishing his sunna prayer when the iqama (call to commence) was made): "If the prescribed prayer begins, you don't finish the sunna, but quit and join the group. Don't listen to Abu Hanifa, or Malik, or Shafi'i; the hadith is clear: La salata ba'da al-iqama illa al-maktuba "There is no prayer after the iqama except the prescribed one."

Now, the dhahir or 'literal meaning' of the hadith was as he said, but the Imams of Shari'a have not understood it this way for the very good reason that Allah says in Surat Muhammad of the Qur'an, "And do not nullify your works" (Qur'an 47:33), and to simply quit an act of worship—namely, the sunna rak'as before fajr—is precisely to nullify one of one's works.

Scholars rather understand the hadith to mean that one may not begin a sunna (or other nafila) prayer after the call to commence (iqama) is given. And this is very usual in human language: to use a general expression, in this case, "There is no prayer" to mean a specific part or aspect of it; namely, "There is no initiating a prayer." Consider how the Qur'an says, "Ask the village we were in, and the caravan that we came with" (Qur'an 12:82), where the dhahir or literal meaning of village and caravan; namely, the assemblage of stone huts and the string of pack animals, are not things that can be asked—but rather a specific aspect or part of them is intended; that is, the people of the village and the people of the caravan, or rather, just some of them. There are many similar expressions in every language, "Put the tea on the stove," for example, not meaning to heap the dried leaves on the stove, but rather to put them in a pot, add water, and light the stove, and so on. It is all the more surprising that anyone, Dhahiri or otherwise, could have ever imagined that Arabic, with its incomparable richness in figures of speech, could be so impoverished as to lack this basic expressive faculty.

In reference to modern re-formers of Islam, such literalism necessarily forces itself upon someone trained in hadith alone, as most of them are, when they try to deduce Shari'a rulings without mastery of the interpretive tools needed to meet the challenges that face the mujtahid, for example, in joining between a number of hadiths on a particular question that seem to conflict, or the many other intellectual problems involved in doing ijtiḥād. This has made some contemporary Muslims seriously believe that it is a matter of either following "the Qur'an and sunna," or one of the schools of the mujtahid Imams.

This idea has only gained credibility today because so few Muslims understand what ijtiḥād is or how it is done. I believe this can be cured by familiarizing Muslims with concrete examples of how mujtahid Imams have derived particular Shari'a rulings from the Qur'an and hadith. Such examples would first show the breadth of their hadith knowledge—Muhammad ibn 'Ubayd Allah ibn al-Munadi,

for example, who died in 272 years after the Hijra, heard Ahmad ibn Hanbal say that having memorized three hundred thousand hadiths was not enough to be a mujtahid—and second, would show the mujtahids' mastery of the deductive principles that enabled them to join between all the primary texts.

Until this is done, the advocates of this movement will probably continue to follow the ijtiḥād of non-mujtahids (the sheikhs who inspire their confidence), under the catch phrase "Qur'an and sunna" just as if the real mujtahids were unfamiliar with these. The followers perhaps cannot be blamed, since "for someone who has never travelled, his mother is the only cook." But I do blame the sheikhs who, whatever their motivations, write and speak as if they were the only cooks.

Finally, if the shortcomings of Dhahiri interpretation is plain enough in fiqh, in 'aqida, it can amount to outright kufr, as when someone reads the Qur'anic verse,

"Today We forget you as you have forgotten this day of yours" (Qur'an 45:34),

and affirms that Allah forgets, which is an imperfection, and not permissible to affirm of Allah. Of this sort of literalism, Dawud al-Dhahiri and Ibn Hazm were innocent, for this is anthropomorphism, meaning to believe Allah has human attributes, and as such is beyond the pale of Islam.

Regarding the second question that I received in my letter, of whether Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal was an anthropomorphist, this is something that has been asked since early times, particularly since someone forged an anthropomorphic tract called Kitab al-sunna [The book of the sunna] and put the name of Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal's son Abdullah on it. It was published in two volumes in Dammam, Saudi Arabia, by Ibn al-Qayyim Publishing House, in 1986.

I looked this book over with our teacher in hadith, Sheikh Shu'ayb al-Arna'ut, who had examined it one day, and said that at least 50 percent of the hadiths in it are weak or outright forgeries. He was dismayed how Muhammad al-Qahtani, the editor and commentator, could have been given a Ph.D. in Islamic faith ('aqida) from Umm al-Qura University in Mecca for readying for publication a work as sadly wanting in authenticity as this.

Ostensibly a "hadith" work, it contains some of the most hard-core anthropomorphism found anywhere, such as the hadith on page 301 of the first volume that "when He Most Blessed and Exalted sits on the Kursi, a squeak is heard like the squeak of a new leather saddle"; or on page 294 of the same volume: "Allah wrote the Torah for Moses with His hand while leaning back on a rock, on tablets of pearl, and the screech of the quill could be heard. There was no veil between Him and him," or the hadith on page 510 of the second volume: "The angels were created from the light of His two elbows and chest," and so on.

The work also puts lies in the mouths of major Hanbali scholars and others, such as Kharija [ibn Mus'ab al-Sarakhsi], who died 168 after the Hijra, and who on page 106 of volume one is quoted about istiwa' (sometimes translated as being 'established' on the Throne), "Does istiwa' mean anything except sitting?"—with a chain of transmission containing a liar (kadhdhab), an unidentifiable (majhul),

plus the text, with its contradiction (mukhalafa) of Islamic faith ('aqida). Or consider the no less than forty-nine pages of vilifications of Abu Hanifa and his school that it mendaciously ascribes to major Imams, such as relating on page 180 of the first volume that Ishaq ibn Mansur al-Kusaj, who died 251 years after the Hijra said, "I asked Ahmad Ibn Hanbal, 'Is a man rewarded by Allah for loathing Abu Hanifa and his colleagues?' and he said, 'Yes, by Allah.'" To ascribe things so fatuous to a man of godfearingness (taqwa) like Ahmad, whose respect for other scholars is well attested to by chains of transmission that are rigorously authenticated (sahih), is one of the things by which this counterfeit work overreaches itself, and ends in cancelling any credibility that the name on it may have been intended to give it.

The ascription of this book to Ahmad ibn Hanbal's son 'Abdullah fails from a hadith point of view, since there are two unidentifiable (majhul) transmitters in the chain of ascription whose names are given as Muhammad ibn al-Hasan al-Simsar and Muhammad ibn Ibrahim al-Harawi, of whom no other trace exists anywhere, a fact that the editor and commentator, Muhammad al-Qahtani, on page 105 of the first volume tries to sweep under the rug by saying that the work was quoted by Ibn Taymiya and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya.

But the fact that such a work even exists may give one an idea of the kinds of things that have been circulated about Ahmad after his death, and the total lack of scrupulousness among a handful of anthropomorphists who tried literally everything to spread their innovations.

Another work with its share of anthropomorphisms and forgeries is Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jawziyya's Ijtima' al-juyush al-Islamiyya [The meeting of the Islamic armies], published by 'Awwad al-Mu'tiq in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, in 1988, which on page 330 mentions as a hadith of the Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace), the words "Honor the cow, for it has not lifted its head to the sky since the [golden] calf was worshipped, out of shame (haya') before Allah Mighty and Majestic," a mawdu' hadith forgery apparently intended to encourage Muslims to believe that Allah is physically above the cow in the sky.

On page 97 of the same work, Ibn al-Qayyim also mentions the hadith of Bukhari, warning of the Antichrist (al-Masih al-Dajjal), who in the Last Days will come forth and claim to be God; of which the Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace) said, "Allah has sent no prophet except that he warned his people of the One Eyed Liar, and that he is one-eyed—and that your Lord is not one-eyed—and that he shall have unbeliever (kafir) written between his two eyes" (Sahih al-Bukhari, 8.172). Ibn al-Qayyim comments, "The Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace) negated the attribute of one-eyedness [of Allah], which is proof that Allah Most High literally has two eyes." Now, any primer on logical fallacies could have told Ibn al-Qayyim that the negation of a quality does not entail the affirmation of its contrary, an example of the "Black and White Fallacy" (for example, "If it is not white, it is therefore black," "If you are not my friend, you must be my enemy," and so on), though what he attempts to prove here does show the kind of anthropomorphism he is trying to promote. Forged chains of hadith transmission in Ibn al-Qayyim's Ijtima' al-juyush al-Islamiyya are the subject of a forthcoming work by a Jordanian scholar, In Sha' Allah, which those interested may read.

For all of these reasons, the utmost care must be used in ascribing tenets of faith to Ahmad ibn Hanbal or other Imams, especially when made by anthropomorphists whose concern is to create credibility for the ideas we are talking about. Many would-be revivers of these ideas today have been misled by their uncritical acceptance of the statements and chains of ascription found in the books of Ibn Taymiya and Ibn al-Qayyim, which they cite in print and rely on, and from whence they get the idea that these were the positions of the early Muslims and prophetic Companions or Sahaba.

Umbrage has unfortunately been taken at the biographies I appended to my translation *Reliance of the Traveller* about Ibn Taymiya and Ibn al-Qayyim, which detail the gulf between Ibn Taymiya's innovations and the 'aqida of the early Muslims, though anyone interested can read about it in any number of other books, one of the best of which has been published in Cairo in 1970 by Dar al-Nahda al-'Arabiyya, and is called *Ibn Taymiya laysa salafiyyan* [Ibn Taymiya is not an early Muslim], by the Azhar professor of Islamic faith ('aqida) Mansur Muhammad 'Uways, which focuses primarily on tenets of belief. Another was written by a scholar who lived shortly after Ibn al-Qayyim in the same city, Taqi al-Din Abu Bakr al-Hisni, author of the famous Shafi'i fiqh manual *Kifaya al-akhyar* [The sufficiency of the pious], whose book on Ibn Taymiya is called *Daf shubah man shabbaha wa tamarrada wa nasaba dhalika ila al-sayyid al-jalil al-Imam Ahmad* [Rebuttal of the insinuations of him who makes anthropomorphisms and rebels, and ascribes that to the noble master Imam Ahmad], published in Cairo in 1931 by Dar Ihya' al-Kutub al-'Arabiyya. Whoever reads these and similar works with an open mind cannot fail to notice the hoax that has been perpetrated by moneyed quarters in our times, of equating the tenets of a small band of anthropomorphists to the Islamic belief ('aqida) of Imam Ahmad and other scholars of the early Muslims (al-salaf).

The real ('aqida) of Imam Ahmad was very simple, and consisted, mainly of tafwid, that is, to consign to Allah the meaning of the mutashabihat or 'unapparent meanings' of the Qur'an and hadith, accepting their words as they have come without saying or claiming to know how they are meant. His position is close to that of a number of other early scholars, who would not even countenance changing the Qur'anic order of the words or substituting words imagined to be synonyms. For them, the verse in Sura Taha,

"The All-merciful is 'established' (istawa) upon the Throne" (Qur'an 20:5)

does not enable one to say that "Allah is 'established' upon Throne," or that "The All-merciful is upon the Throne" or anything else besides "The All-merciful is 'established' (istawa) upon the Throne." Full stop. Their position is exemplified by Sufyan ibn 'Uyayna, who died 98 years after the Hijra, and who said, "The interpretation (tafsir) of everything with which Allah has described Himself in His book is to recite it and remain silent about it." It also resembles the position of Imam Shafi'i, who simply said: "I believe in what has come from Allah as it was intended by Allah, and I believe in what has come from the Messenger of Allah (Allah bless him and give him peace) as it was intended by the Messenger of Allah."

It should be appreciated how far this school of tafwid or 'consigning the knowledge of what is meant to Allah' is from understanding the mutashabihat or 'unapparent in meaning,' scriptural expressions about Allah as though they were meant literally ('ala al-dhahir). The Hanbali Imam Ahmad ibn Muhammad al-Khallal, who died in Hijra year 311, and who took his fiqh from Imam Ahmad's students, relates in his book al-Sunna through his chain of narrators from Hanbal ibn Ishaq al-Shaybani, the son of the brother of Ahmad ibn Hanbal's father, that

Imam Ahmad was asked about the hadiths mentioning "Allah's descending," "seeing Allah," and "placing His foot on hell"; and the like, and Ahmad replied: "We believe in them and consider them true, without 'how' and without 'meaning' (bi la kayfa wa la ma'na)."

And he said, when they asked him about Allah's istiwa' [translated above as established]: "He is 'established' upon the Throne (istawa 'ala al-'Arsh) however He wills and as He wills, without any limit or any description that be made by any describer (Daf' shubah al-tashbih, 28).

This demonstrates how far Imam Ahmad was from anthropomorphism, though a third example is even more explicit. The Imam and hadith master (hafiz) al-Bayhaqi relates in his Manaqib al-Imam Ahmad [The memorable actions of Imam Ahmad], through his chain of narrators that:

Ahmad condemned those who said Allah was a "body," saying, "The names of things are taken from the Shari'a and the Arabic language. The language's possessors have used this word [body] for something that has height, breadth, thickness, construction, form, and composition, while Allah Most High is beyond all of that, and may not be termed a "body" because of being beyond any meaning of embodiedness. This has not been conveyed by the Shari'a, and so is rebutted" (al-Barahin al-sati'a, 164).

These examples provide an accurate idea of Ahmad's 'Aqida, as conveyed to us by the hadith masters (huffaz) of the Umma, who have distinguished the true reports from the spurious attributions of the anthropomorphists' opinions to their Imam, both early and late. But it is perhaps even more instructive, in view of the recrudescence of these ideas today, to look at an earlier work against Hanbali anthropomorphists about this bid'a, for the light this literature sheds upon the science of textual interpretation, and I will conclude my talk tonight to it.

As you may know, the true architect of the Hanbali madhhab was not actually Imam Ahmad, who did not like to see any of his positions written down, but rather these were conveyed orally by various students at different times, one reason there are often a number of different narratives from him on legal questions. It is probably no exaggeration to say that the real founder of the Hanbali madhhab was the Imam and hadith master (hafiz) 'Abd al-Rahman ibn al-Jawzi, who died 597 years after the Hijra, and who recorded all the narratives from Imam Ahmad, distinguished the well-authenticated from the poorly-authenticated, and organized them into a coherent body of fiqh jurisprudence.

Ibn al-Jawzi—who is not to be confused with Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jawziyya—took the question of people associating anthropomorphism with Hanbalism so seriously that he wrote a book, *Daf' shubah al-tashbih bi akaff al-tanzih* [Rebuttal of the insinuations of anthropomorphism at the hands of transcendence], refuting this heresy and exonerating his Imam of any association with it.

One of the most significant points he makes in this work is the principle that *al-Idafatu la tufidu al-sifa*, meaning that an ascriptive construction, called in Arabic an *idafa*, 'the x of the y' or in other words, 'y's x' does not establish that 'x is an attribute of y.' This is important because the anthropomorphists of his day, as well as Ibn Taymiyya in the seventh century after the Hijra, used many ascriptive constructions (*idafa*) that appear in hadiths and Qur'anic verses as proof that Allah had "attributes" that bolstered their conceptions of Him.

To clarify with examples, you are doubtless familiar with the Qur'anic verse in Surat al-Fath of the Sahaba swearing a fealty pact (*bay'a*) to the Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace), that says,

"Allah's hand is above their hands" (Qur'an 48:10).

Here, with the words *yad Allahi* 'the hand of Allah,' Ibn al-Jawzi's principle means that we are not entitled to affirm, on the basis of the Arabic wording alone, that "Allah has a hand" as an attribute (*sifa*) of His entity. It could be that this Arabic expression is simply meant to emphasize the tremendousness of the offense of breaking this pact, as some scholars state, for the Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace) placed his hand on top of the Sahaba's, and the wording could be a figure of speech emphasizing Allah's backing of this action; and classical Arabic abounds in such figures of speech. The Prophet himself (Allah bless him and give him peace) used hand as a figure of speech in the rigorously authenticated (*sahih*) hadith, *Al-Muslimu man salima l-Muslimuna min lisanihi wa yadihi* "The Muslim is he who the Muslims are safe from his tongue and his hand," where hand means anything within his power to do to them, whether with his hand, his foot, or by any other means. As Imam al-Ghazali says of the word hand:

One should realize that hand may mean two different things. The first is the primary lexical sense; namely, the bodily member composed of flesh, bone, and nervous tissue. Now, flesh, bone, and nervous tissue make up a specific body with specific attributes; meaning, by body, something of an amount (with height, width, depth) that prevents anything else from occupying wherever it is, until it is moved from that place.

Or [secondly] the word may be used figuratively, in another sense with no relation to that of a body at all: as when one says, "The city is in the leader's hands," the meaning of which is well understood, even if the leader's hands are missing, for example (al-Ghazali, *Iljam al-'awam 'an 'ilm al-kalam* [Beirut: Dar al-Kitab al-'Arabi, 1406/1985], 55).

We have already mentioned the school of thought of Ahmad ibn Hanbal, Shafi'i, and other early Muslims of understanding the *mutashabihat* or 'unapparent in meaning,' scriptural expressions about Allah by *tafwid* or 'consigning the

knowledge of what is meant to Allah.' But secondly, we have seen from the example of the hand, that because of the figurative richness the Arabic language, and also to protect against the danger of anthropomorphism, many Muslim scholars were able to explain certain of the mutashabihat or 'unapparent in meaning' expressions in Qur'anic verses and hadiths by ta'wil, or 'figuratively.'

This naturally drew the criticism of neo-Hanbalis, at their forefront Ibn Taymiya and Ibn al-Qayyim, as it still does of today's "reformers" of Islam, who echo these two's arguments that figurative interpretation (ta'wil) was a reprehensible departure (bid'a) by Ash'aris and others from the way of the early Muslims (salaf); and who call for a "return to the sunna," that is, to anthropomorphic literalism. Now, the obvious question in the face of such "reforms" is whether literalism is really identical with pristine Islamic faith ('aqida). Or rather did figurative interpretation (ta'wil) exist among the salaf? We will answer this question with actual examples of mutashabihat or 'unapparent in meaning' Qur'anic verses and hadiths, and examine how the earliest scholars interpreted them:

1. Forgetting. We have mentioned above the Qur'anic verse,

"Today We forget you as you have forgotten this day of yours" (Qur'an 45:34),

which the early Muslims used to interpret figuratively, as reported by a scholar who was himself an early Muslim (salafi) and indeed, the sheikh of the early Muslims in Qur'anic exegesis, the hadith master (hafiz) Ibn Jarir al-Tabari who died 310 years after the Hijra, and who explains the above verse as meaning:

"This day, Resurrection Day, We shall forget them,' so as to say, 'We shall abandon them to their punishment.'" Now, this is precisely ta'wil, or interpretation in other than the verse's ostensive sense. Al-Tabari ascribes this interpretation, through his chains of transmission, to the Companion (Sahabi) Ibn 'Abbas (Allah be well pleased with him) as well as to Mujahid, Ibn 'Abbas's main student in Qur'anic exegesis (Jami' al-bayan, 8.202).

2. Hands. In the verse,

"And the sky We built with hands; verily We outspread [it]" (Qur'an 51:47),

al-Tabari ascribes the figurative explanation (ta'wil) of with hands as meaning "with power (bi quwwa)" through five chains of transmission to Ibn 'Abbas, who died 68 years after the Hijra, Mujahid who died 104 years after the Hijra, Qatada [ibn Da'ama] who died 118 years after the Hijra, Mansur [ibn Zadhan al-Thaqafi] who died 131 years after the Hijra, and Sufyan al-Thawri who died 161 years after the Hijra (Jami' al-bayan, 27.7-8). I mention these dates to show just how early they were.

3. Shin. Of the Qur'anic verse,

"On a day when shin shall be exposed, they shall be ordered to prostrate, but be unable" (Qur'an 68:42),

al-Tabari says, "A number of the exegetes of the Companions (Sahaba) and their students (tabi'in) held that it [a day when shin shall be exposed] means that a dire matter (amrun shadid) shall be disclosed" (Jami' al-bayan, 29.38)—the shin's association with direness being that it was customary for Arab warriors fighting in the desert to ready themselves to move fast and hard through the sand in the thick of the fight by lifting the hems of their garments above the shin. This was apparently lost upon later anthropomorphists, who said the verse proved 'Allah has a shin,' or, according to others, 'two shins, since one would be unbecoming.' Al-Tabari also relates from Muhammad ibn 'Ubayd al-Muharibi, who relates from Ibn al-Mubarak, from Usama ibn Zayd, from 'Ikrima, from Ibn 'Abbas that shin in the above verse means "a day of war and direness (harbin wa shidda)" (ibid., 29.38). All of these narrators are those of the sahih or rigorously authenticated collections except Usama ibn Zayd, whose hadiths are hasan or 'well authenticated.'

4. Laughter. Of the hadith related in Sahih al-Bukhari from Abu Hurayra that the Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace) said,

Allah Most High laughs about two men, one of whom kills the other, but both of whom enter paradise: the one fights in the path of Allah and is killed, and afterwards Allah forgives the killer, and then he fights in the path of Allah and is martyred,

the hadith master al-Bayhaqi records that the scribe of Bukhari [Muhammad ibn Yusuf] al-Farabri related that Imam al-Bukhari said, "The meaning of laughter in it is mercy" (Kitab al-asma' wa al-sifat, 298).

5. Coming. The hadith master (hafiz) Ibn Kathir reports that Imam al-Bayhaqi related from al-Hakim from Abu 'Amr ibn al-Sammak, from Hanbal, the son of the brother of Ahmad ibn Hanbal's father, that

Ahmad ibn Hanbal figuratively interpreted the word of Allah Most High,

"And your Lord shall come . . ." (Qur'an 89:22),

as meaning "His recompense (thawab) shall come."

Al-Bayhaqi said, "This chain of narrators has absolutely nothing wrong in it" (al-Bidaya wa al-nihaya, 10.342). In other words, Ahmad ibn Hanbal, like the Companions (Sahaba) and other early Muslims mentioned above, sometimes also gave figurative interpretations (ta'wil) to scriptural expressions that might otherwise have been misinterpreted anthropomorphically. This was also the way of Abul Hasan al-Ash'ari, founder of the Ash'ari school of Islamic belief, who had two views about the mutashabihat, the first being tafwid, or 'consigning the knowledge of what is meant to Allah,' and the second being ta'wil or 'figurative interpretation' when needed to avoid the suggestion of the anthropomorphism that is explicitly rejected by the Qur'an.

In light of the examples quoted above about such words about Allah as 'forgetting,' 'hands,' 'shin,' 'laughter,' 'coming,' and so forth, it is plain that Muslims scholars of 'Aqida, whether of the Ash'ari school or any other, did not

originate ta'wil or figurative interpretation, but rather it had been with Muslims from the beginning, because that was the nature of the Arabic language. And if the above figures are not the salaf or 'early Muslims,' who are? Ibn Taymiya and Ibn al-Qayyim, who died more than seven centuries after the Hijra?

In view of the foregoing examples of figurative interpretation by early Muslims, we have to ask, Whose 'early Islam' would today's reformers of 'Aqida have us return to? Imam Abu Hanifa first noted, "Two depraved opinions have reached us from East, those of Jahm [ibn Safwan], the nullifier of the divine attributes, and those of Muqatil [ibn Sulayman al-Balkhi, the likener of Allah to His creation" (Siyar a'lam al-nubala,' 7.202).

These are not an either-or for Muslims. Jahm's brand of Mu'tazilism has been dead for over a thousand years, while anthropomorphic literalism is a heresy that in previous centuries was confined to a handful of sects like the Hanbalis addressed by Imam Ibn al-Jawzi in his *Daf' shubah al-tashbih*, or like the forgers of *Kitab al-sunna* who ascribed it to Imam Ahmad's son 'Abdullah, or like the Karramiyya, an early sect who believed Allah to be a corporeal entity "sitting in person on His Throne."

As for Islamic orthodoxy, the Imam of Ahl al-Sunna in tenets of faith, 'Abd al-Qahir al-Baghdadi says in his 'aqida manual *Usul al-din* [The fundamentals of the religion]:

Anyone who considers his Lord to resemble the form of a person [. . .] is only worshipping a person like himself. As for the permissibility of eating the meat he slaughters or of marriage with him, his ruling is that of an idol-worshipper.

. . . Regarding the anthropomorphists of Khurasan, of the Karramiyya, it is obligatory to consider them unbelievers because they affirm that Allah has a physical limit and boundary from underneath, from whence He is contact with His Throne (al-Baghdadi, *Usul al-din* [Istanbul: Matba'a al-Dawla, 1346/1929], 337).

In previous Islamic centuries, someone who worshipped a god who 'sits,' moves about, and so forth, was considered to be in serious trouble in his faith ('aqida). Our question should be: If anthropomorphic literalism were an acceptable Islamic school of thought, why was it counted among heresies and rejected for the first seven centuries of Islam that preceded Ibn Taymiya and his student Ibn al-Qayyim, and condemned by the scholars of Ahl al-Sunna thereafter?

To summarize everything I have said tonight, we have seen three ways of understanding the *mutashabihat*, or 'unapparent in meaning' verses and hadiths: *tafwid*, 'consigning the knowledge of what is meant to Allah,' *ta'wil*, 'figurative interpretation within the parameters of classical Arabic usage,' and lastly *tashbih*, or 'anthropomorphic literalism.'

We saw that the way of *tafwid* or 'consigning the knowledge of what is meant to Allah,' was the way of Shafi'i, Ahmad, and many of the early Muslims. A second interpretive possibility, the way of *ta'wil*, or 'figurative interpretation,' was also done by the Companions (Sahaba) and many other early Muslims as reported

above. In classical scholarship, both have been considered Islamic, and both seem needed, though tafwid is superior where it does not lead to confusion about Allah's transcendence beyond the attributes of created things, in accordance with the Qur'anic verse,

"There is nothing whatsoever like unto Him" (Qur'an 42:11).

As for anthropomorphism, it is clear from this verse and from the entire history of the Umma, that it is not an Islamic school of thought, and never has been. In all times and places, Islam has invited non-Muslims to faith in the Incomparable Reality called Allah; not making man a god, and not making God a man. Wa jazakum Allah khayran, wa l-hamdu li Llahi Rabbil 'Alamin.

Related Articles

Is it permissible for a Muslim to believe that Allah is in the sky in a literal sense?

www.masud.co.uk | More by same Author